For Steve Anker

Natural Features (1989, 30 min., color, sound) by Gunvor Nelson; and Friendly Witness (1989, 32 min., color, sound) by Warren Sonbert.

The mystery and hidden meanings images can suggest when they are stripped from their usual contexts has always been a special province ideally suited for filmmakers to explore. Gunvor Nelson and Warren Sonbert have each developed a distinctive way of creating tapestries of moving images which deny familiar cinematic ingredients such as character and plot yet are profoundly evocative and visually stunning experiences. For tonight's program the Film Festival in collaboration with the San Francisco Cinematheque will present the premieres of major new works by two of the Bay Area'a most esteemed independent and personal filmmakers.

Swedish-born ~~Gunvor~~ Nelson has for more than twenty years produced a group of films remarkable for their visual beauty and intricacy. In Natural Features, hundreds of still images (of herself, political figures, personal momentoes, newspaper illustrations, and others in the public domain) ~~mingle~~ with 3-Dimensional objects (toys, jigsaw puzzles, foil-wrapped chocolates, paint brushes) and 'real' (though distorted) images photographed through glass layerings into a free-associative and frequently bizarre form of animation. Sometimes the weave of images and sounds feel almost Bergman-esque in creating an internalized landscape of dark-hued moods, though the playfulness of Nelson's shifting keeps us off-balance and the film more truly close to the surreal. Perhaps no film has more successfully blended a passion for painting with a senstivity to filmmaking, as lush color pigments continually alter and punctuate the different photographic layerings.

Warren Sonbert's Friendly Witness moves out into the world for the source of its imagery, ranging from his own backyard to some of the most remote places on the earth. As with several of Sonbert's earlier films made during the last two decades, Friendly Witness can at first glance be mistaken as simply a travelogue or diary film. But while much of the power of the images lies in their startling subject matter or photographic quality, it is the interweave which Sonbert creates which gives them cinematic depth. Forgoing any pretense of a linear narrative connecting the hundreds of shots, glances, symbolic gestures, rhythmic motions, colors and textures, and other sometimes subtle visual elements echo and rhyme, sometimes returning with a haunting and new dimension. The binary soundtrack--the first half familair pop tunes, the second somber orchestral music--serves as a curious counterpoint to the images, sometimes bringing us more forcefully into the flowing images, sometimes driving us back to contemplate.